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1992

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### Recommended Citation

Lockton, H. A. (1992). Seeing green: Adventists and the environment. *College and University Dialogue*, 4(2), 5-7, 34. Retrieved from <http://dialogue.adventist.org/>

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# Seeing Green: Adventists and the Environment

Harwood A. Lockton

**E**nvironmental issues are now part of the public consciousness. Should Adventists be "seeing green," or is this a cultural fad of the 1990s? Is there anything in the Seventh-day Adventist tradition that is "green"? Is ecological concern the exclusive preserve of the New Agers?

In a much-quoted paper, Lynn White argued that Christianity is responsible for the world's ecological problems. To remedy this situation, Christianity would either have to be significantly altered by adopting the attitudes toward nature that were held by St. Francis of Assisi, or it would have to be abandoned in favor of Zen Buddhism. The problem, as White saw it, is that Christianity "not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends."<sup>1</sup>

Despite several rebuttals in the past 25 years by both Christians<sup>2</sup> and non-Christians, this antipathy to Christianity is widely held in the environmental movement and helps explain the movement's ready acceptance of pantheistic, New Age ideas.

## A Biblical View

Does the Bible condone an exploitative attitude toward the environment? Can we build a biblical ethic of the environment? Reference to the main events of salvation history—Creation, the Fall, Redemption, and the Eschaton—as well as the Sabbath helps us answer these questions.

**Creation.** "Christianity and the ideas that lay behind it is a philosophy of creation.

It is preoccupied with the Creator, with the things he created and their relationships to him and among themselves."<sup>3</sup> Yet Adventists have tended to be more preoccupied with the *process* of creation than with its *significance*.

Genesis 1 makes it clear that the world is God's. Genesis 1:26-28 shows that Adam and Eve lived in a triple relationship: with God (made in His image), with others ("be fruitful and increase"), and with the world ("rule over", "subdue it").<sup>4</sup>

The problem comes with the notions of ruling (*dominion* in the KJV) and subjugation. White's argument focuses on the use of this text. "Be fruitful and increase" are commands given to all creatures, but only humans are commanded to rule and subdue. The English translation of the Hebrew words (*radah* and *kabash*) is milder than the Hebrew original. *Radah* means "to trample," as in treading grapes in a winepress. *Kabash* conveys the image of a con-

queror placing his foot on the neck of the vanquished.<sup>5</sup>

But the context of this statement is important. Immediately preceding it is the statement about humans being made in God's image (Genesis 1:26, 27). Without that image, humans cannot exercise their rule correctly. Hall argues that the term "image of God" should be read as a verb.<sup>6</sup> People are called to "image" or copy God in all their relationships, including the ecological. Immediately following the statement, an implied restriction is placed on this authority to rule (Genesis 1:29, 30): meat eating is not permitted.

Equally important is Genesis 2:15 where Adam and Eve are placed in the garden "to work it and take care of it." The Hebrew word *abad* ("to work") means to serve in the sense of a servant or slave. The other word, *shamar* ("to care") means to watch over and preserve. Wilkinson indicates that both words imply actions done for the benefit of the object (i.e.

the Earth) and not primarily for the sake of the doer.<sup>7</sup> The command of Genesis 2 greatly limits the power implied in Genesis 1.

Two clusters of ideas are in tension in Genesis 1 and 2. On the one hand, humanity is made in God's image and so is set apart from nature. We are called to serve nature, to shower beneficence upon it just as God blesses us. Yet on the other hand, we are creatures and so are a part of nature and have to rule over it in order to survive. However, we have to remember God's rule over us. As Stott remarks, "We combine dependence upon God with dominion



over the Earth.”<sup>8</sup> But, as people have forgotten their dependence upon God, so the Earth has suffered at the hands of humanity.

**The Fall.** The three intertwined relationships to God, to others, and to nature were violently disrupted at the Fall. Humanity disobeyed God (Genesis 3:1-7) and consequently experienced spiritual distance from Him (Genesis 3:8-10). Adam blamed Eve, thus generating social disharmony (Genesis 3:11-16). The ecological relationship with nature was also fractured (Genesis 3:17-19). The whole creation suffered the consequences of the Fall (Romans 8:19-22). The effects were not limited to the spiritual domain. The breaking of the spiritual relationship, in fact, disrupted both the social and the ecological relationships. The beneficence and obedience that flowed through the created order were replaced by disobedience and the resulting curse. There was now a fundamental flaw in human nature. This is the root of modern humanity’s environmental predicament: the nature of human nature, not the divine injunction.

**Redemption.** Redemption is renewal through Christ of the fallen image of God in humanity (Romans 8:29, 30; 2 Corinthians 3:18). This renewal involves the same three relationships established at Creation. These relationships are integral; as our relationship with God is restored, so are our relationships with others and with our environment. Redeemed people should aspire to be good stewards of God’s Earth.

**The Eschaton.** Since Christians expect Christ to return soon and establish a new order on a new Earth, why should they be concerned about the environment of this Earth? We can compare this to the care we give to our bodies, even though we know that at the resurrection they will be replaced. God’s commands for us to care for our bodies and

for the environment are not nullified by the knowledge of the future return of Christ. In fact, God will destroy those who destroy the Earth (Revelation 11:18).

The three angels’ messages of Revelation 14 are central to Adventist eschatology. Pilmour suggests they are concerned with the same three relationships outlined in the Creation account, though in reverse sequence.<sup>9</sup> The first message calls us to “worship him who made the heavens, and the earth, the sea and the springs of water” (Revelation 14:7). How do we worship the Creator? Certainly not by worshipping His creation, which is pantheism, nor by destroying it. As Seventh-day Adventists, who place major emphasis on the Creation account and on Revelation, we should be the “greenest” of Christians!

**The Sabbath.** The Sabbath is another key Adventist belief, though more often it has been non-Adventists who have seen its relevance to the environment debate. First, the Sabbath is a memorial to Creation (Exodus 20:11). It is the day to remember the Creator and think about His work rather than our own. Second, it is the

day of rest, not only for humanity, but also for creation (Exodus 20:10, 11). It is to be a day of re-creation rather than a day of leisure or “wreck-creation.”

The Sabbatical year was an extension of the weekly Sabbath. The land was to be allowed to rest every seven years (Exodus 23:10, 11; Leviticus 25:1-7). The Sabbath principle calls for periodic rest and regeneration. This contrasts with the upward exponential curve of growth beloved by economists and politicians. The Sabbath calls for restraint in both production and consumption. It stands as a check against rampant materialism and the consequent degradation of the environment.

This Earth is God’s, given to humanity as leasehold, not freehold. We are its managers and stewards. We are neither owners who can exploit nor museum curators who lock away its treasures.

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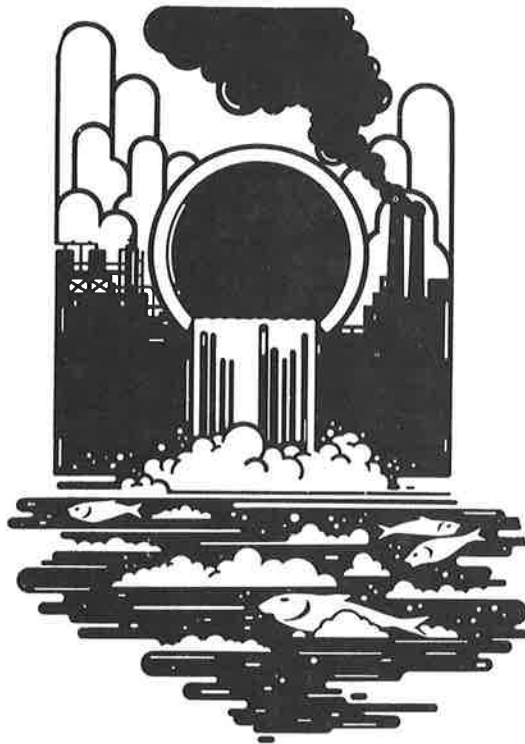
### Contemporary Green Philosophies

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While some Adventists may fall into the danger of not being creation-responsible, others may unwittingly accept some undesirable aspects of the green philosophies in their enthusiasm to be creation-responsible.

As a reaction against the environmental excesses underpinned by naturalism, the worldview that holds that there is no God and everything can be explained in terms of natural processes, many greens have adopted a pantheistic worldview. Pantheism holds that everything is God, there is no distinction between God, humanity, or nature.<sup>10</sup> Wilkinson argues that in contemporary North America the real alternative to Christianity is no longer secular humanism but an eclectic spirituality that encompasses the New Age movement and pantheism.<sup>11</sup>

Pantheism has been readily accepted into green philoso-



phy because it sees no dichotomy between people and the rest of the natural world. Nature is to be protected and preserved because God is in it. But pantheism allows no special place for humanity. The biblical account, however, makes it clear that humanity was created in God's image and has been created just a little lower than the angels (Psalm 8:5). Shaefer points out that pantheism reduces humans to the level of nature; it does not elevate nature to the level of humanity.<sup>12</sup>

Concepts of pantheism and eastern religions are infusing some Christian understandings about environment. Sean McDonagh, building on the pantheistic mysticism of medieval Catholicism, sees Hinduism, Buddhism, and tribal religions as enriching the Christian understanding of our relationships to nature.<sup>13</sup> Though we applaud his concern to take "care of the Earth," his use of these non-Christian ideas is confusing and unbiblical.

New Age thinking is a related movement. It is an eclectic collection of concepts and philosophies, many of which derive from eastern reli-

gions, the occult, and science. In essence, it is monistic, making no distinction between God, people, and nature. Consequently we *are* God. But as Cooper points out, "Christians aspire to *communion*, not *union* with God."<sup>14</sup> Unfortunately, some fundamentalist Christians have rejected all notions of environmental responsibility, which they see as part of a New Age conspiracy to establish Satanic rule over the world.<sup>15</sup>

Another related concept is Gaia, seen by some environmentalists as a secular, non-religious alternative to humanism. Lovelock and Margulis argue that the Earth is a living organism that regulates itself and all life upon it. Hence, the idea of God as sustainer of His creation is redundant. Acceptance of this idea, called the Gaia hypothesis after the Greek goddess of the Earth, has occurred in both the New Age movement and scientific circles,<sup>16</sup> leading Cooper to call it "scientific paganism."<sup>17</sup>

Deep ecology is based on the premise of biocentric equality; that is, that all forms of life have an equal right to exist, including animals, insects, rivers, and ecosystems. Logi-

cally, it includes plants. . . although even committed ecologists have to eat! As with pantheism, it seems to place higher value on non-human life than on human life, and tends to be indifferent to human suffering.

Christians need to steer a course through the straits of both humanism and pantheism. We should be green in the sense of caring for God's creation, but we should also carefully evaluate contemporary green philosophies and reject concepts that are not biblical. As Christians we should clearly articulate and *practice* our green concern so that those disillusioned with secular humanism can see Christianity as a valid and coherent alternative to the New Age movement's response to the environment.

At the personal level, the Bible requires that we be good stewards of God's creation. If we follow its guidelines for living here on this Earth, God will be pleased to entrust us with the care of the New Earth.

## NOTES

1. Lynn White, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155 (1967), p. 1205.

2. See for example, R. H. Ayers, "Christian Realism and Environmental Ethics" in E. C. Hargrove (ed.), *Religion and Environmental Crisis* (Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 1986), pp. 154-171; and Tom Cooper, *Green Christianity* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1990), pp. 36, 37.

3. Clarence Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore: Nature and Culture in Western Thought from Ancient Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967).

4. All biblical references are to the New International Version, unless indicated in the text.

5. Loren Wilkinson, (ed.) *Earth-keeping: Christian Stewardship of Natural Resources* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), p. 209.

6. D. J. Hall, *Imaging God: Dominion as Stewardship* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1986).

7. Wilkinson, op. cit., p. 209.

8. John Stott, *Issues Facing Christians Today*, 2nd. ed. (London: Marshall Pickering, 1990), p. 26.

9. Victor Pilmoor, "Green Piece: God,

## What Can I Do?

As Christians, we need to understand how our actions affect the environment. Some of the issues are fairly complex, while others are more simple and easier to apply. Here are a few suggestions:

- **Adopt a simpler life-style.** Remember that everything that you buy eventually becomes garbage. Don't buy products with excessive packaging. Reuse as much as you can. Fix broken items rather than throwing them away. Sell or donate items you can't use anymore. Walk or ride a bicycle instead of using the car. You'll get some exercise and help the air stay cleaner.

- **Learn to conserve water.** For example, turn off the faucet when you're brushing your teeth; take shorter showers; use leftover cooking water for plants; keep a jug of ice water in the refrigerator instead of letting the water run cold each time you want a drink.

- **Organize a litter patrol day.** Select as a group clean-up project an area of your college or university campus, the neighborhood of your church, a nearby community park, a beach, or a stretch of highway.

- **Plant a tree.** Trees use carbon dioxide and water in photosynthesis to produce glucose and oxygen. One tree can remove as much as 48 pounds of carbon dioxide from the air each year. A full-grown birch tree provides enough oxygen for a family of four people.

Check your library for publications with practical ideas for protecting the environment in the area where you live. Two small books published by the EarthWorks Group (1400 Shattuck Ave., #25; Berkeley, CA 94703; U.S.A.) are useful: *50 Simple Things You Can Do to Save the Earth* (1989), and *The Next Step: 50 More Things You Can Do to Save the Earth* (1991).

Please turn to page 34

## Seeing Green . . .

 Continued from p. 7

Man and Nature; Three-Dimensional Imagery," *Meridian* 2 (1990), pp. 11-13.

10. See Humberto M. Rasi, "Fighting on Two Fronts: An Adventist Response to Secularism and Neopanthemism," *Dialogue* 3:1 (1991), pp. 4-7, 22, 23.

11. Loren Wilkinson, "New Age, New Consciousness, and the New Creation," in W. Granber-Michaelson (ed.), *Tending the Garden: Essays on the Gospel and the Earth* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1987), p. 10.

12. Francis Schaefer, *Pollution and the Death of Man* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1970), p. 26.

13. Sean McDonagh, *To Care for the Earth* (Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian Publications, 1986); see also Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988).

14. Cooper, op. cit., p. 118.

15. See Constance Cumbe, *The Hidden Dangers of the Rainbow: The New Age Movement and Our Coming Age of Barbarism* (Shreveport, Louisiana: Huntingdon House, 1983); and Dave Hunt, *Peace, Prosperity and the Coming Holocaust: The New Age Movement in Prophecy* (Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House, 1983).

16. See, for example, Norman Myers (ed.), *The Gaia Atlas of Planet Management* (London and Sydney: Pan Books, 1985).

17. Cooper, op. cit., p. 151.

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## Caring for Creation

### A Seventh-day Adventist Statement on the Environment\*

The world in which we live is a gift of love from the Creator God, from "Him who made the heavens, the earth, the sea, and the springs of water" (Revelation 14:7; 11:17, 18). Within this creation He placed humans, set intentionally in relationship with Himself, other persons, and the surrounding world. Therefore, as Seventh-day Adventists, we hold its preservation and nurture to be intimately related to our service to Him.

God set aside the seventh-day Sabbath as a memorial and perpetual reminder of His creative act and establishment of the world. In resting on that day, Seventh-day Adventists reinforce the special sense of relationship with the Creator and His creation. Sabbath observance underscores the importance of our integration with the total environment.

The human decision to disobey God broke the original order of creation, resulting in a disharmony alien to His purposes. Thus our air and waters are polluted, forests and wildlife plundered, and natural resources exploited. Because we recognize humans as part of God's creation, our concern for the environment extends to personal health and lifestyle. We advocate a wholesome manner of living and reject the use of substances such as tobacco, alcohol, and other drugs that harm the body and consume earth's resources; and we promote a simple vegetarian diet.

Seventh-day Adventists are committed to respectful, cooperative relationships among all persons, recognizing our common origin and realizing our human dignity as a gift from the Creator. Since human poverty and environmental degradation are interrelated, we pledge ourselves to improve the quality of life for all people. Our goal is a sustainable development of resources while meeting human needs.

Genuine progress toward caring for our natural environment rests upon both personal and cooperative effort. We accept the challenge to work toward restoring God's overall design. Moved by faith in God, we commit ourselves to promote the healing that rises at both personal and environmental levels from integrated lives dedicated to serve God and humanity.

In this commitment we confirm our stewardship of God's creation and believe that total restoration will be complete only when God makes all things new.

(\*) This statement was adopted on October 1992 by the delegates attending the Annual Council of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

## Pontius' Puddle

